

Unraveling Power Issues in Social Work Practice with Couples

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Statement of the Research Problem

Social workers are obliged more than others to consistently view problems and issues in their larger social, political, and economic contexts in all arenas of practice. Gun-toting teens, forgotten elders, "welfare mothers," and abused wives are more than their biologies, psychologies, or family dynamics. Rather, these and other "problems" are "made" (Anderson, 1995, p. 10) and remade within institutional structures. They are created in social, political, and economic life. Similarly, social workers who work with couples without addressing the broader social scene that creates the category "couple" may reinforce the inequitable roles that have captured men and (especially) women for centuries. Social workers given their historical commitment to illuminating and remediating oppressive social institutions and circumstances, have a unique opportunity and responsibility to exert leadership in bringing socio-political awareness to this practice arena.

That men and women exhibit differences in their approach to relationships is well established in popular culture (e.g., Gray, 1992) and in the literature (Bem, 1974, 1987; Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Maccoby, 1990; Maltz and Borker, 1982; McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989; Meth & Pasick, 1990; Rhodes, 1985; Tannen, 1990). Much of this work points to differential socialization as the cause; however, differential power afforded women and men is also important. Men and women are not just different; they are unequal. For example, the female partner in a cross-gender relationship, even when employed, carries the majority of responsibility for the day-to-day maintenance of the home and family relationships (Berardo, Shehan & Leslie 1987; Blair & Lichter, 1991; Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Hochschild, 1989; Rabin, 1992, 1994; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Walczak, 1988). She is less able than her male partner to financially provide for herself and children in the likely chance the couple divorces (Nuccio & Sands, 1992). Following divorce, women's standard of living drops sharply, representing them among the poor disproportionately (Peterson, 1996; Weitzman, 1988; Ziegler & Frank, 1988); and, those entitled to or granted child support often do not receive it (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1991).

Many scholars see marriage, as currently practiced in the United States, as an unjust yet idealized institution (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Gerson, 1985; Johnson, 1988;

Okin, 1989; Weitzman, 1988). Hare-Mustin (1991, pp. 40-41) writes, "Marriage has been described as a lifelong oppositional play of power masquerading as pleasure." Women in this system are often rendered vulnerable through dependency that is shaped and sustained by current social arrangements (Okin, 1989).

Inequality in marriage stems from the inequality in the wider society that follows men and women into marriage. Men and women, in fact, continue to choose one another on the basis of this inequality. Women are led to want someone smarter, richer, taller--the reciprocal of what men want in order to reinforce their power (Goodrich, 1991, p. 12). That gender creates difficulty when men and women relate to one another is also established (Gottman, 1991, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Markman & Kraft, 1989; Markman, 1991). What to do about the differences, the inequalities, in practice with couples is less well known.

Research Questions

The study presented in this paper (Parker, 1996) explores feminist approaches to dealing with power and inequity issues in therapeutic work with cross-gender couples. Purposefully selected feminist social workers and family therapists were interviewed in 1995 to examine such approaches. My intention was to capture what feminist practitioners, who say they deal with gender equity issues, actually do. Although there is a considerable body of research on how men and women differ and on the inequities between the genders, what to do about that in practice is less well known. Hence, the purpose of this study, more specifically, was to glean from feminist practitioners the components of such an approach.

The study was conducted within a particular ideological perspective, feminist postmodernism. Feminist postmodernism, as the name implies, requires an examination of two perspectives: feminism and postmodernism. Feminist theory was used to examine the place of gender in cross-gender counseling theory (e.g., Goldner, 1988; Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989). Feminist theory, however, has been challenged by feminist women of color (Harding, 1986; hooks, 1984). Though it puts women's experiences into the picture by challenging the notion that there is some universal experience of reality, that of western, bourgeois, heterosexual, white males, feminist theory all too often has had as its subject: universal, western, bourgeois, heterosexual, white women. Consequently, the meeting with postmodern theory provided a needed critique to feminist theories that totalize, or reduce the complexity, of women's experiences. Feminist postmodernists unearth the missing voices, the hosts of women and men living in enigmatic historical networks of class, race, culture and sexual orientation (Harding, 1986).

Correspondingly, feminism provides postmodernism a politics (Flax, 1987). When unreflective, postmodernism can become another kind of absolute relativism, accepting all claims to truth as equally valid. Relativism denies political and power realities (Harding,

1986). This of course belies feminism's claim that women's oppression is real. The blending of postmodernism's "sophisticated and persuasive critique of essentialism with feminism's social analysis and call to action" (Baber & Allen, 1992, p. 10) provides a powerful tool for examining women's experiences in the cross-gender dyad (Harding, 1986; Hawkesworth, 1989). It offers a meta-perspective on two potential biases in the gender conversation: the tendency to exaggerate gender differences and the tendency to ignore such differences (Hare-Mustin, 1987, 1991). In short, the feminist postmodern perspective used throughout this study included the following premises:

1. There is a gender system;
2. This system is unequal;
3. Inequality needs to be identified and addressed;
4. There are no absolute Truths; therefore, universalizing theories are suspect;
5. Power mediates social relations;
6. Difference is valued; missing voices are sought;
7. Theories reflect the standpoint of the theorist and tend to either overemphasize or under-emphasize gender difference where it exists.

The question that drives this exploration is: How do social workers / family therapists address, in their work with couples, the important socio-political issues that impact couples' arrangements, often resulting in the subjugation of women? In other words, how do practitioners go beyond maintaining the status quo to being agents of social change? How do they address the structure of power and control (e.g., the allocation of income, paid work, child care, and home care)? How do they affect oppression in practice? And, what would a feminist approach look like—one that goes beyond essentializing "men are: / women are": dichotomies and actually strives to alter the socially induced disparities between men and women? What do expert practitioners of this perspective actually do? What are the contours of their practice? What questions do they ask? What issues do they address? What information do they give? What methods do they find successful?

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the development of practice approaches (i.e., strategies) that address gender differences and gender inequity. Key elements of these approaches were to be inductively derived from participants responses then defined, described and analyzed. Thus, a qualitative procedure was appropriate (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994;

Patton, 1990). Moreover, because the question of how to address socio-political issues in therapeutic work with couples has not been adequately examined in the literature, this research was exploratory, possibly identifying variables suitable for later inquiry. Finally, the ideological perspective utilized, feminist postmodernism, called for approaches that honor multiple realities, strive to create social change, recognize power inequities, are interactive with those studied, do not purport to have found truth, and include the researcher as a dynamic (versus removed or objective) respondent in the research process (Baber & Allen, 1992; Harding, 1986). Qualitative research was appropriate for each of these concerns (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The sample was obtained purposefully. The criteria for selection were what Patton (1990, p. 169) calls "information-rich" cases (i.e., persons recognized by professional peers for being knowledgeable about practice strategies that address inequity issues in couples' work). The sample was delimited in three ways. First, all those invited to participate are persons regarded as experts in the social work/family therapy field; second they practice from a feminist postmodern perspective; and third they employ a family system and/or general systems theoretical perspective. An initial list of "expert" feminist family therapists was generated. These were persons who emerged in the family therapy literature and/or are recognized as feminist social work / family therapy leaders. This initial group was then used to launch a snowball sample. The resulting sample comprised fifteen women.

Interviews were conducted in January 1995. All participants were tape-recorded then transcribed. Grounded theory procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to generate and analyze themes from the data. The objective was to create interrelated hypotheses or themes based on the interview data. Analysis used the qualitative data analysis computer software program NUD.IST (Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing) (Richards & Richards, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). NUD.IST is a program that aids researchers in handling nonnumerical and unstructured data. It is an on-line filing system that allows researchers to organize, then store data as they are analyzed. It helps with mechanical tasks involved in data management. The computer, of course, does not make conceptual decisions. It does not think, decide, interpret, or analyze. Those are the investigator's tasks.

An inductive, cross-case strategy was used to analyze the data. Interview transcripts were scrutinized line-by-line for themes, patterns, and discrete ideas. Each interview was perused until no more new categories were perceived. Themes were then labeled, a process called open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and entered into NUD.IST. NUD.IST stores categories as they are created in an index system that is then displayed pictorially as a tree of categories and subcategories. The categories generated capture both the power issues my respondents believe are significant in cross-gender relationships as well as the strategies they use to address power and inequity issues.

Results

Interviews with these expert practitioners garnered a richly detailed set of strategies therapists can use to address gender inequity when working with cross-gender couples. The central theme, or core category, that emerged from the data was: the difficulty of raising power issues. In other words, respondents stressed that how family therapists manage to bring power issues into conversation when it is the last thing partners want to address is of central importance to feminist work. Does the therapist¹ wait for partners to recognize, then raise, power as an issue? Does she² lecture or educate couples about potential power issues (i.e., provide socio-education)? Does she confront power issues as she recognizes them? And, with which couples does she raise power issues? Does she broach them with all couples, or only with those seeking a more equitable relationship?

Since they require acknowledgment of inequity and unfairness, power disparities are not comfortable issues to be aware of, much less to raise for conversation and analysis. Consequently, the manner by which power issues are broached is itself a central challenge for therapists committed to gender equity. If the subject of power is not on the table, it is invisible, absent, and therefore nonnegotiable. It does not become part of the conversation.

Raising the issues, then, is the problem: to raise the issues and not lose the clients, particularly the ones with more power who are not so anxious to give it up; to make what has been invisible, visible; what has been comfortable, less comfortable; what has been absent, present. Respondents' strategies for raising power issues were various. They depended on the therapist's own style and training, her age and status in the field, and most certainly on what each regards as the most effective way to obtain results in altering power hierarchies.

Two levels of strategies were garnered: strategies for broaching power issues and strategies for maintaining power as a focus in therapeutic work. The "First-Level Strategies" speak to how a therapist induces couples to begin thinking about their dilemmas as having a basis in power relations (Parker, in press-a). In a sense these strategies help to provide an ideological segue or bridge between the therapist and client; that is, they help bring clients to the therapist's ideological orientation. This was critical for these feminist family therapists

¹ The more generic term "therapist" will be used throughout to denote persons who work therapeutically with couples (i.e., social workers, marriage and family therapists, counselors, and psychologists). It is also how most of my respondents refer to themselves -- as feminist therapists or family therapists.

² When generally referring to a therapist, I more often use the pronoun she. I use it as a measure to reduce the cumbersome his/her, she/he. Also, all of my participants were female. Therefore, the use is descriptive. My use of she does not mean to imply that males cannot or should not employ the strategies discussed here.

because the strategies introduce the political and social dimensions of couples' dilemmas into partners' awarenesses, then into therapeutic conversation. With these First-Level Strategies, therapists must somehow raise what is unseen, and perhaps unpleasant, to the surface, and to what is available for conversation. Raising difficult issues for scrutiny is, of course, not unique to feminist therapy. What is unique is the object: power issues. First-Level Strategies are:

- Structuring the Session for Consciousness Raising;
- Boldly Naming the Power Issues;
- Indirectly Raising Power Issues; and
- Meeting with Partners Separately to Raise Power Issues

The first two strategies are straightforward. The last two are more indirect. The categories presented are not mutually exclusive, it should be noted, but various ways to address power issues. Implicit in all of the strategies is that couples' problems have roots in patriarchy. To begin to unravel the problems, the socio-cultural system impinging on the couple has to be illuminated and brought to bear.

"Second-Level Strategies" address what therapists do once power issues have been initially broached (Parker, in press-b). They, in contrast to First Level Strategies, are more specific and content oriented. They address how to keep power issues on the table once they have been raised. Power dynamics are unraveled in specific problem areas so that clients begin to identify both the costs of the current power structure and resources for change. The strategies keep partners in the uncomfortable heat of discussions of power and inequity.

These strategies, like First-Level Strategies, are not mutually exclusive. Therapists can work back and forth among strategies to help couples identify, and keep their focus on, power issues. They may be used with each other and any of the First-Level Strategies. The strategies themselves are not necessarily feminist. Several of them incorporate familiar concepts from the family therapy literature. It is the way they are used to unearth power dynamics that renders the strategies feminist. The Second-Level strategies are:

- Contextualize;
- Identify Consequences;
- Both/And;
- Best Self;

- Challenge the Woman to Insist on Justice;
- She Can/He Can't;
- Utilize Gender Differences;
- Most Difficult;
- Homework.

One premise shared by my respondents is that therapeutic intervention is a political endeavor, and involves a process of social critique. What is common among these practitioners are approaches that put gender and power relations front and center. Such approaches compose the platforms from which social workers identify and deconstruct power dynamics that undergird the problems couples present for therapy.

How can therapists address power issues in their work with cross-gender couples? Somehow therapists must raise the issues. This is the heart of the work, the core category that emerged in these data. First-Level strategies are employed by therapists to help partners recognize that their issues have a basis in power. In other words, First-Level Strategies help raise to awareness power issues that structure the relationship. Second-Level Strategies address what the therapist does once power issues have been initially surfaced. These strategies help to further explore power issues that have been raised. Again, the strategies are not linear but are related in a reciprocal manner.

Utility for Social Work Practice

This dissertation explored one aspect of a sprawling topic: oppression in family systems. The facet explored here was the subordination of women in cross-gender relationships. The study investigated, and therefore offers to the literature, practice interventions that address power issues in social work with cross-gender couples. Described here is an emerging intervention model that seeks to address particularly the oppression of women from a feminist postmodern perspective. Implications for social work practice are discussed. My premise is that social workers should take the lead in bringing social awareness to the family/couples counseling practice arena, and in fact to all areas of direct practice. Doing so, after all, very naturally incorporates the most concrete definition of social work--an occupation directed toward remedying societal problems (Compton & Gallaway, 1994). The equality of men and women in relationships would seem an obvious undertaking.

Why are more social workers not taking the lead? Why the continued intra-psychic fascination for social work practitioners? And, what are the potential obstacles to this

approach being widely implemented? The obstacles I submit are: social work's history as a second class profession; its quest for professionalization; and the polarization perpetuated between direct and indirect practice advocates. All three tend to secure social work practice as a status quo preservation activity. For practice to be otherwise requires deliberate intention as well as knowledge and skills such as those my respondents offered. Further research is needed to continue to develop methods for affecting oppression in families. I suggest three projects that address gaps in the present study: first, directly observing respondents performing the strategies described in this study; second, expanding the sample to include the perspectives of men and additional persons of color; and third, conducting a case study to more intensively study the components of a feminist postmodern intervention model.

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